

Social media and teenagers – a practical approach



Is social media damaging the mental health of young people? Dr John Coleman, distinguished psychologist and co-author of the book ‘Parents and Digital Technology’, looks behind the headlines.

There is no doubt that today social media is seen by adults as representing a major threat to young people. There is much debate in the press and in public about the so-called “evils” of the digital world. Parents and professionals worry about the time spent online, about the content that is seen by teenagers, and about the possible temptations that abound in the online world. Newspaper headlines such as ‘Social media fuels rise in self-harm’ (Evening Standard), and ‘Girls unhappy, stressed and addicted to web’ (The Times) are commonplace. The striking thing is that this anxiety is not experienced in the same way by young people themselves. By and

large they are aware of the risks in the online world, and believe that they are able to manage them. In my work with young people I ask them whether they see themselves as experiencing stress. They agree that the teenage years are a time of high stress, but not because of social media. The things they identify as stressful are tests, exams and pressure from school. They also talk about parental expectations, and sometimes pressure from friends. The digital world comes low down in their list of things that create stress and anxiety.

Mental health

As indicated by the newspaper headlines, many adults link the rise in mental health problems to the use of social media but it is really important to note that there is no reliable scientific evidence to support this link. It does appear to be the case that, certainly among teenage girls, mental health problems such as

depression are on the rise, but there is no clear link between this and the use of social media.

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Of course we cannot ignore the fact that there are teenagers who are vulnerable. These individuals may be isolated, they may have to deal with difficult family situations, or they may have experienced trauma of one sort or another. For these young people the internet may provide an outlet, or a safe place to go for support. The online world may provide a way of sharing experiences with others who are facing similar adversity. These individuals may be less able to manage the risks of the digital world, or they may more easily be drawn to some of the more dangerous internet sites. Professionals should be alert to these vulnerabilities, and do all they can to provide extra support in the use of social media and other internet activities for this group.

Threats and opportunities

It is important to be clear that the internet provides many positive experiences, not just for teenagers, but for those of all ages. These include:

- Instant access to information
- Ease of communication
- A means of sharing and networking with groups of friends
- A medium for an extraordinary range of creative activities,

including art, music, design, and a multitude of other possibilities

- A way of meeting new people
- Access to the buying and selling of goods

These are just a few of the many positive opportunities that have been made possible by the internet and the online world. Of course it is also possible to construct a list of the opposites, the threats posed by the digital world. These will be familiar to readers, but they include such things as access to pornography, excessive gaming, sexting, gambling, being groomed, and so on. We must be clear that, as with any new technology, there are both positives and negatives. The online world is not going to go away, so the challenge for us is to do all we can to make it as safe a world as possible for our young people.

The role of parents

The first thing to say is that parents do have a role, and this role does not stop when the child moves to secondary school. Many parents believe that once the teenage years kick in, they are no longer important. This is partly because the young person appears to be more interested in their friends than in their parents, and partly because it is more difficult to find a role if a teenager is being rude, disrespectful and uncommunicative. However, the parent’s role is as significant during the teenage years as it is in the early years: it is just significant in a different way. All the evidence shows that outcomes for teenagers are better when the family remains

involved, continuing to offer support and guidance during these sometimes difficult years.

There is another reason why parents are especially important at this time, and this is because it is not just the teenagers who are using social media! Parents too want to look at their phones at all times, they want to share images, purchase goods online, and generally access all the good things that the internet provides. Parents are digital role models, and their online behaviour is going to have an effect on the behaviour of their children and young people. You cannot expect your teenager to manage the digital world well if you are constantly looking at your phone!

Consider what is age appropriate

It goes without saying that the needs of children and young people will vary depending on their age. As a parent you are not going to treat a 16-year-old in the same way as you treat a 10-year-old. Broadly speaking we can say that the younger the child, the more support and guidance they need. However appealing online activities are, do try and restrict the use of screens for all ages, but particularly for the younger age groups. Do find alternative, non-technological activities, for children to enjoy.

It is useful to consider that there are particular ages where extra support may be necessary. One such group is the 10- to 13-year-olds as they first start to negotiate the online world on

their own. Professionals have pointed out that the pressure to be popular, and to obtain as many “likes” as possible, is hard to resist at this stage when peer relationships are becoming especially important.

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Although older teenagers may attempt to push adults away, it is critical that parents keep an eye on what is going on for this group. New and tempting games, sexual or violent content, pressure from certain websites, all these can in some circumstances lead to excessive use of the internet. Parents may feel it is hard to monitor online activities in this age group, but this should not hinder proper oversight. Even the most mature teenagers may sometimes find themselves pulled into behaviour that is not helpful. Parents should remain alert for any signs of inappropriate use of the digital world.

Screens at night

One of the most difficult challenges for parents relates to screens at night. However much the teenager protests, all the reliable advice is for parents to make sure that phones and other devices are switched off at night. In the best of circumstances all devices will be left outside the bedroom, and turned off about a half hour before bedtime. This gives

the teenager time to wind down and prepare for sleep.

Scientific evidence shows clearly that good quality sleep is hugely important for young people. We now know that sleep is a time of memory consolidation, so that the quality of sleep will be directly related to the individual's capacity to learn and memorise. We have also learnt that the body clock works slightly differently in teenagers than in adults, so many young people become sleepy later in the evening than their parents. Yet sleep is essential at this stage. The more parents can do to encourage good sleep routines, the better for the young person's health and school work.

A family digital strategy

Any approach by parents to the use of social media by young people has to involve the whole family. As I have noted, parents are role models, and it is no use making rules (such as no phones at mealtimes) if parents do not respect the rules themselves. It can be extremely helpful if the family as a whole works out some rules that everyone can get behind. Children and teenagers are more likely to accept structures that have been negotiated than ones that have been imposed.

Parents will make more progress if they accept that the online world has many opportunities to offer. Parents should work with their children to manage it sensibly. Many families find it helpful to have some non-technology time, sometimes

called “digital detox”. Do try it – you may be surprised by the results.

Finally, remember the phrase “digital resilience”. Too many adults think about the digital world as a threat. Yet this is not how it is seen by young people. It is the responsibility of adults, both parents and professionals, to help children and teenagers develop the skills they need to navigate the online world in safety. They need help to develop digital resilience. If we try we can all contribute to this. Good luck!

Ten top tips for a digitally healthy household

1. Remember – the younger the child, the more support and guidance they'll need
2. Be aware that extra support may be needed at certain ages, such as 10 – 13
3. Find non-technological activities for children to enjoy
4. Stay alert for any signs of inappropriate use of the digital world
5. Make sure devices are switched off at night and for half an hour before bedtime
6. Work out some rules together...
7. ...and respect the rules yourself!
8. Be aware of the positives as well as the negative side of technology
9. Have a regular family digital detox
10. Aim for 'digital resilience'